

**River Towns in the Great West: the Structure of Provincial
Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820-1870/New Towns in
the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-
Century Urban Frontier**

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River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820-1870, by Timothy R. Mahoney. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. xii, 319 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, charts, notes, appendixes, index. \$39.50 cloth.

New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier, by David Hamer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. x, 328 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM SILAG, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Timothy R. Mahoney's splendid *River Towns in the Great West* may well change the way we think about the nineteenth-century settlement of Iowa and of the entire region defined by the Mississippi and Missouri river systems. "To be on a great river," writes Mahoney, "was akin to driving on a modern interstate highway." Access to a water route "dramatically expand[ed] the range of one's reach and contact across continental space." Merchants in the fledgling towns along the Mississippi saw the economic opportunities from the start. By the 1820s, a line of trade appeared along the river route from St. Louis to Galena, and in the following decade—with the advent of agricultural settlement in western Illinois and eastern Iowa—a network of commerce began to emerge.

Tracing the rise of this vast agricultural region as an economic and urban system in the years 1820 to 1870, Mahoney analyzes the pattern of population growth along the river in those years, showing how prominently market criteria figured in individual settlers' decisions about where to break sod and set up housekeeping. In that period, the region was settled and developed commercially on the back of a steamboat transportation system based in St. Louis and reaching north to Galena and beyond. Wheat, lead, and corn and hogs fueled a network of trade that spread inland from the river-transport system; exchange between commodity-producing frontier farmers and pioneer merchants constituted the dynamic of urban development in the region. Within the nexus of this frontier trade, Mahoney finds the roots not only of the region's economic structure and settlement patterns, but also its social order and its cultural character.

That is no small claim, but the rigor of Mahoney's analysis and the thoroughness of his documentation are sufficient to sustain his argument. It's not that historians have heretofore ignored *region* as an analytical concept, or that no one has employed a theory of urbanization in describing the processes of settlement and economic growth that took place in the nineteenth century. But no one to my knowl-

edge has before attempted such sweeping coverage of a half-century of human development—detailing the environmental, commercial, and community dimensions of the process—with such authority.

We learn about the rivers themselves, about how they were perceived and utilized by the first European settlers in the area, and about how settlers responded to the transport opportunities offered by the rivers. We also learn about the fate of the settlers' various plans to exploit the river commercially. Extensive graphics show the shape of the evolving regional trade pattern and its local manifestations in particular towns and rural areas. Estimates of the volume of trade, of the frequency of shipments, and of the character of commerce—derived by the author from concrete data according to explicit techniques—take us beyond the generalizations of economic history texts to a richer sense of the actual human experience of trade and transport on the nineteenth-century waterways.

Decisions and strategies, words Mahoney uses often, are considered on individual and community levels as he assesses their impact on the shape of the transportation network, economy, and urban system that brought the region into the nation's commerce in the 1840s. He makes particularly effective use of case studies of towns (Galena, St. Louis, Davenport, and others) and of commodity flows (wheat, lead, and corn and hogs), showing how cycles of business activity produced the region's distinctive river-centered commercial culture in the antebellum period. Here and throughout the book, Mahoney constructs a highly readable narrative from a diverse collection of sources, including newspapers, gazetteers, city directories, eyewitness accounts, and statistics of trade. He also succeeds in integrating the theoretical literature of geographical analysis into his narrative without distracting from the interesting story he has to tell.

Mahoney's accounts of the lives of merchants and farmers are imbued with a vitality and authenticity that is rare even in the detailed social histories of life in the region that have appeared in the past decade. He illuminates the economic mechanisms that made fortunes, broke dreams, and consigned individuals and communities to positions of prominence or marginality in the growth area of antebellum America. Readers will finish the book with a clearer sense of how and why such places as Davenport, Keokuk, Galena, Quincy, and St. Louis developed, for he persuades us to see their histories as he does: as part of a broad regional process of production and consumption, of trade and communication, that created distinctive opportunities for individuals and communities—and also set very specific boundaries on the ways they could respond. Antoine LeClaire, who does not lack coverage in our histories of Iowa, has in

my experience never received his due as a business leader as he does here. Mahoney chronicles the fates of a number of other individual and community fortunes as well, through the peak years of the mid-1850s and the subsequent commercial crisis on the eve of the Civil War. Mahoney's purpose here is to demonstrate a basic proposition that underlies his entire book: "All the people of the [region] were somehow constrained, limited, or redirected in their economic strategies and social interactions by the spatial and economic dimensions of the system in which they lived" (175).

The historiographic agenda of David Hamer's *New Towns in the New World* differs considerably from that of Mahoney's *River Towns in the Great West*. For one thing, Hamer's coverage extends beyond the American middle border to examine western frontiers in nineteenth-century Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as well. For another, Hamer is less interested in the actual process of urban development than in contemporary images and perceptions of that process. He focuses on the mentality of the frontier urbanite, analyzing the assumptions and expectations that informed the behavior of pioneer town builders and promoters. By employing data from four frontiers, Hamer can address larger issues as well, including the influence of the pioneering experience on national character and public policy.

Hamer seeks to understand what happened on the urban frontier "in relation to broader ideas held at the time of what towns were or ought to be like as communities." His survey of the travel literature and booster press reveals four clusters of such ideas: those related to themes of newness; those contrasting old and new worlds; those relating urban growth to theories of social evolution; and those looking to the "civilizing" impulses of town life to replace the "savagery" of the frontier "wilderness." Much of what Hamer says about each of these ideas will be familiar to students of the frontier or of American civilization in general. What is distinctive is his exhaustive consideration of their bearing on the cultural character of four developing nations. This comparative dimension, more than the compilation of the contemporary statements themselves, marks Hamer's contribution to the literature of frontier history.

In the United States, town building was a function of private enterprise. Except indirectly—in choosing county seats and state capitals, or in subsidizing transportation development—government had little to do with town promotion. This was not so elsewhere: government agencies in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada took more active roles in forming towns and managing their growth throughout their respective frontier periods. The availability of relatively cheap land in the United States was exceptional as well, at least as compared

to the Australian experience. There, a monopoly kept many potential settlers off the land and forced them into the primary cities of Melbourne and Sydney, which as a result grew to proportions considered frightening by nineteenth-century observers. Such urban concentrations were viewed in Australia, as in North America, as the source of many of the social and moral evils of the epoch.

The cultural consequences, suggests Hamer, were significant. Contemporaries believed the recursive pattern of frontier settlement in the United States slowed social "progress" and thereby postponed an inevitable "decline" of civilization. This view—of the salutary effects of the frontier experience on the character of American society—of course underlies the intellectual traditions represented by Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Jackson Turner. But in Australia, writes Hamer, "there was no ongoing process, spread over a century, in which new cities kept rising as new regions were opened for settlement" (139). Instead, the antipodean pattern looked more like that of the far western United States, where "instant cities" rose suddenly in the middle of virtually uninhabited landscapes. New Zealand and Canada, by contrast to Australia, exhibited more gradual urban development, along the decentralized lines familiar to observers of the American Middle West.

Unfortunately, much of the value of this comparative analysis is diminished by the author's presentation, in which the reader encounters series after series of rambling travel anecdotes, commentaries on local newspaper items, and deliberations on the secondary sources, each series meant to illustrate a particular theme. The analysis is neither well-served by the book's somewhat casual narrative nor helped by the author's reluctance to specify at the outset his own view of what *did* happen in these urban experiences, as opposed to what contemporaries *thought* was happening. Without such firm footing—that is, a concrete understanding of the urbanization process (through settlement maps, population statistics, and so on)—the reader can become lost amid a welter of vague or hyperbolic utterances from contemporary speakers who give us scant cause for trust or sympathy. *New Towns in the New World* is a book about images and perceptions, but its author might have done more to clarify their lasting cultural significance and to measure more precisely and systematically their departure from actual experience.

In his concluding chapter, Hamer remarks on the "close connections between the rise of towns and the consolidation of territorial consciousness, identity, and 'pride'" (224). His *New Towns in the New World* does much to spell out the terms of this consciousness and the public discussions in which it took shape. He has provided much use-

ful information to historians of the frontier who look to the pioneer experience as a laboratory of human motivations and values. If he stops short of a definitive cultural history of pioneering, he nevertheless facilitates future research by using a comparative approach to sort the general from the specific. In many ways, because of the wider geographic range and the literary quality of his sources, Hamer faced a tougher task in producing decisive conclusions than did Mahoney, whose territorial and temporal range is much narrower. Nevertheless, Mahoney's *River Towns in the Great West* is an impressive debut. Students of frontier Iowa would do well to read his book very closely, for its publication has raised our standards of research and interpretation substantially.

Fertility Change on the American Frontier: Adaptation and Innovation, by Lee L. Bean, Geraldine P. Mineau, and Douglas L. Anderton. Studies in Demography. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. xiii, 295 pp. Tables, figures, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DON R. LEET, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

American fertility was legendary even in the eighteenth century. High birth rates and rapid population growth in New England led the English economist T. R. Malthus to conclude that unfettered procreation would lead to a doubling of the human population every twenty-five years. He believed the inevitable result of such population increases would be a catastrophic increase in the death rate. Similar remarks are made today by neo-Malthusian authors who view world population trends as ominous. If Bean and his coauthors are correct, we have little to fear from the demographic doomsayers who predict the demise of humanity based on a neo-Malthusian model of unbridled procreation.

The authors' optimistic results are based on a unique data set from Utah that contains the reproductive records of women who were born between 1800 and 1899 and ceased childbearing by 1940. These records are part of a computerized database built on a set of family records from the Genealogical Society of Utah. Using this database, the authors are able to reconstruct the fertility experience of Utah women from the early nineteenth through the middle of the twentieth century. This allows the authors to test their hypotheses using individual microlevel fertility data, rather than relying on aggregate data from the census. For example, they can link the number of children ever born to a particular birth cohort of women, measure the length of the birth interval for women, calculate the mean age at marriage for

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